



# The Power of Ikigai: Unveiling Purpose for Lawyer Well-Being

**Finding a purpose in life can make it easier to tolerate and survive unavoidable changes, stresses, and losses.**

BY JULIE BONASSO

In nearly every client interaction I have, there is a common yet almost imperceptible thread that runs throughout conversations – a low-level, ever-present nagging feeling that something is amiss. Some people say it’s burnout, overwhelm, or lack of work-life balance. And while that is often true, there is something else going on beneath the surface that feels too remote, scary, or vague to try and peel back the layers.

For the past 15 years, in studying the habits of over-committed professionals and coaching on the topic of well-being, I’ve observed one major trend. Driven, talented, and successful people are struggling with sustaining healthy behaviors – leading to an epidemic of burnout, chronic diseases, and a decrease in longevity.<sup>1</sup>

Why is this? I think it’s because we are treating the symptoms before getting to the root of the problem. And a problem is that we are not living our ikigai (ee-key-guy).

## What is Ikigai?

“Ikigai is a Japanese concept, dating back to the Heian period (794-1185), and means your ‘reason for being.’”<sup>2</sup> Ikigai has been described as one’s life purpose or bliss. It is the sum of small joys and is what inspires a person to rise out of bed every day.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of ikigai is believed to have originated from the foundational health and wellness philosophies within established Japanese medicine. This ancient medical doctrine suggests that individuals’ physical health is influenced by their mental and emotional well-being, as well as their overall sense of life purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Japan is ranked second in the world for life expectancy, with women living to about 88 years and men approximately 82 years.<sup>5</sup> While

it’s true that diet plays a role, many Japanese people believe ikigai has a lot to do with their longevity and living a happy life.<sup>6</sup>

In their book, *Ikigai, The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, authors Héctor García and Francesc Marcelles describe ikigai as the intersection of “passion, mission, vocation and profession.” This is reflected on a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) and encompasses the following four elements:

- What you love
- What you’re good at
- What you can be paid for
- What the world needs

When I first learned about ikigai, this diagram resonated with me, and I began using it as a teaching tool with my clients. However, in re-researching this article, I found that this graphic is a depiction of the western interpretation of ikigai. Ken Mogi, a neuroscientist who has



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## ON BALANCE

studied ikigai, argues that this version of ikigai is too limiting and might be difficult to achieve.<sup>7</sup>

For the Japanese, “ikigai is a state of [well-being] that arises from a devotion to activities one enjoys, which also brings a sense of fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup> And while ikigai can result in success, success is not a prerequisite to finding ikigai.<sup>9</sup> Examples of ikigai can include spending time with a family member, engaging in a hobby, or volunteering, or it can be related to a career. It can be everything in between. It’s a nuanced philosophy.

### Ikigai and Connection to Well-Being

For many decades, researchers have pursued the secrets to a long, fulfilling life. While genetics, diet, and exercise play their part, studies hint at a crucial factor: finding purpose in our existence.

In a 2008 study by Tohoku University, data from over 50,000 participants (ages 40-79) shed light on the effects of ikigai

on health. Study participants who reported having a sense of ikigai experienced notably reduced risks of cardiovascular diseases and had lower mortality rates. The study revealed a staggering statistic – 95% of respondents living with ikigai were still thriving seven years post-survey compared to only 83% of those who didn’t embrace their ikigai.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, in a 2019 JAMA Network Open study involving almost 7,000 adults ages 50 and above, researchers examined the correlation between a “life purpose” scale and mortality rates.<sup>11</sup> They discovered intriguing results: individuals scoring higher on this scale were less prone to mortality over the four-year study span. Additionally, this group displayed lower instances of mortality related to heart, circulatory, or blood conditions as compared to people with lower scores on the life purpose scale.<sup>12</sup>

According to Eric S. Kim, a research scientist at the Harvard School of Public Health, the importance of the 2019 study was that it “showed for the first time that a sense of purpose in life is associated with specific causes of death, and that’s an interesting advancement in knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

Kim further suggests that purpose may affect health in some meaningful ways:

**Purpose makes people more likely to protect their health.** If you are living your ikigai (or purpose), you might make better food choices, prioritize sleep, or find more physical activity in your day.

**Purpose could improve resilience.** Lab studies and longitudinal research indicate that individuals with a profound sense of life purpose tend to exhibit greater protection against stressors and demonstrate a quicker recovery when faced with heightened stress.

**Purpose could reduce inflammation.** When we are stressed, cortisol levels are increased, which causes inflammation. And inflammation has been linked to cardiovascular disease and other health conditions. Lowering our stress

levels can help to reduce inflammation, which may in turn affect our health.<sup>14</sup>

### The Cost of Disconnectedness

When individuals are disengaged from their sense of purpose or ikigai, various negative consequences for their overall well-being might occur. In my experience, this disconnection can contribute to mental and emotional distress, potentially leading to stress-related health issues, reduced productivity, and a diminished quality of life. Furthermore, when my clients are not aligned with their ikigai, they experience a sense of separation from their authentic selves, which can negatively influence relationships, work satisfaction, and an overall sense of fulfillment.

An example is my client Charlie,<sup>15</sup> age 60, who has devoted his life to the law. He is still working but is being gently nudged out of his firm. He is wrestling with what his identity and life look like without the partner imprimatur. Over the past 30 years, he has cut himself off from his family, his community, and hobbies because of his job demands.

Now, his hours and work quality are suffering because his daily actions are not bringing him a sense of purpose or fulfillment. He is experiencing anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Charlie isn’t alone. I have observed this detachment among brilliant, successful lawyers whom I speak with on a regular basis. Their stories are similar. At the outset of their careers, they dreamed of championing justice, creating societal change, or leaving a strong legacy. However, the never-ending demands of the profession have transformed their once-passionate pursuits into a relentless grind, leaving them separated from the very purpose that led them to the law. They find themselves juggling overwhelming caseloads, navigating through complex bureaucracy, and living life by the billable hour, all while grappling with a sense of emptiness.

Sound familiar?



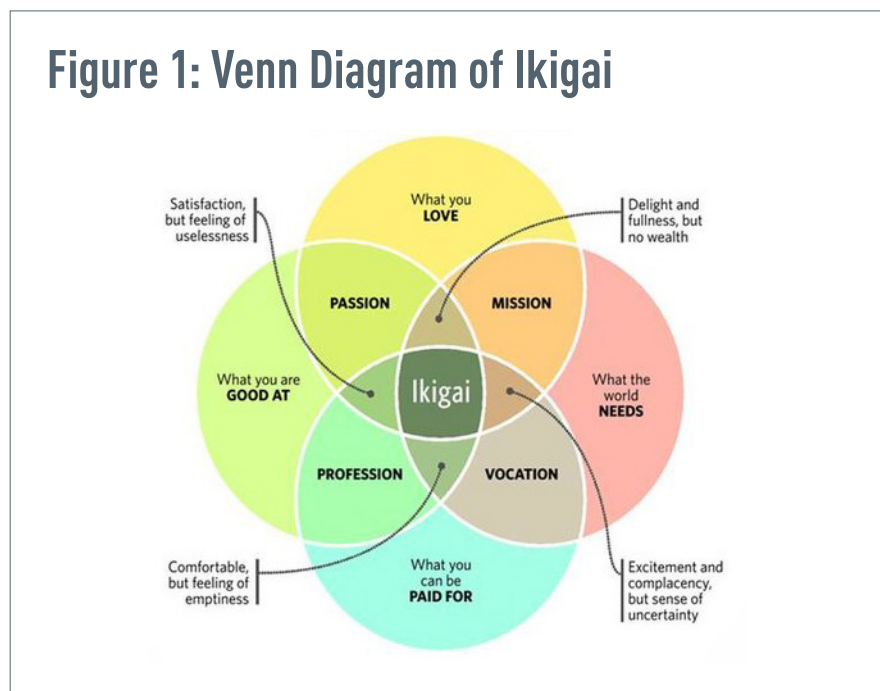
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Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Ikigai



### Three Strategies for Embracing Ikigai

Many people have been inundated with information about the benefits of mindfulness, proper nutrition, and exercise. And while all of those are important and necessary for overall well-being, we know these tactics alone are not working.<sup>16</sup> Try something different. Here are three practical strategies for lawyers to explore and integrate Ikigai into their lives:

#### 1) Seek Meaningful Connections.

Build and nurture relationships with people, communities, or causes that resonate with your passions and contribute positively to your life's purpose. Find someone new who inspires you and reach out to that person to meet for a coffee or to take a walk. Seek a volunteer opportunity to feed your soul. Connect with your next-door neighbor.

**2) Practice Self-Acceptance.** Observe your thoughts and emotions without judgment. Notice how often you engage in self-criticism. Ask yourself, would I say that to another person? Over time, rewrite the harsh narratives by focusing on your strengths, talents, and small wins of the day. Practice forgiveness toward yourself.

**3) Savor Small Pleasures.** Find joy and purpose in the mundane, everyday activities. Cultivate awareness and appreciation for small moments of happiness, whether being captivated by a roaring fire, gardening, playing with your grandchildren, or exploring other richness found in life's simplicity.

### A Way of Life

In exploring ikigai, it became apparent to me that it's not a destination to reach but a way of being. To the Japanese, ikigai is "like the air [they] breathe."<sup>17</sup> It can't be distilled into a formula or even a Venn diagram.

As Mogi eloquently noted, "it resides in the realm of small things" – a truth often overlooked in the relentless pursuit of success.

What is one tiny spark that will ignite your spirit and inspire you to wake up each day to joy? **WL**

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joel Achenback, Dan Keating, Laurie McGinley & Akilah Johnson, *An Epidemic of Chronic Illness is Killing Us Too Soon*, Washington Post (Oct. 3, 2023 online edition).  
<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Perry, *What Is Ikigai and How Can It Change My Life?* BetterUp (May 7, 2021), <https://www.betterup.com/blog/what-is-ikigai>.  
<sup>3</sup>Ken Mogi, *Awakening Your Ikigai: How the Japanese Wake Up to Joy and Purpose Every Day* (2018).  
<sup>4</sup>Jeffrey Gaines, *The Philosophy of Ikigai: 3 Examples About Finding Purpose*, PositivePsychology.com (modified Oct. 3, 2023), <https://positivepsychology.com/ikigai/#ikigai>.  
<sup>5</sup>Data as of 2019. See European Parliamentary Rsch. Serv., *Japan's Ageing Society* (Dec. 2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/BRIE/2020/659419/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)659419\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/BRIE/2020/659419/EPRS_BRI(2020)659419_EN.pdf).  
<sup>6</sup>Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones: Secrets for Living Longer* (National Geographic, 2023).  
<sup>7</sup>Ikigai Tribe, *Ken Mogi on What Makes the Ikigai Venn Diagram Wrong* (Jan. 26, 2022), <https://ikigaitribe.com/blogpost/ken-mogi-on-the-ikigai-venn-diagram/>.  
<sup>8</sup>Gaines, *supra* note 4 (referencing Michiko Kumano).  
<sup>9</sup>Mogi, *supra* note 3.  
<sup>10</sup>See also Ken Mogi, *This Japanese Secret to a Longer and Happier Life Is Gaining Attention from Millions Around the World*, makeit (updated May 28, 2019), <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/22/the-japanese-secret-to-a-longer-and-happier-life-is-gaining-attention-from-millions.html>.

<sup>11</sup>Aliya Alimujiang et al., *Association Between Life Purpose and Mortality Among US Adults Older Than 50 Years*, JAMA Network (May 24, 2019), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2734064>.

<sup>12</sup>It is important to be aware that a "stronger life purpose" did not seem to protect participants from other health conditions such as cancer or respiratory tract conditions. Moreover, this type of observational study is limited in its nature because it did not prove causation. See also Kelly Bilodeau, *Will a Purpose-Driven Life Help You Live Longer?* Harvard Health Pub. (Nov. 28, 2019), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/will-a-purpose-driven-life-help-you-live-longer-2019112818378>.

<sup>13</sup>See Bilodeau, *supra* note 12.

<sup>14</sup>Kim recommends that we continue to explore the relationship between life purpose and health outcomes through further empirical research.

<sup>15</sup>The name of my client has been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>16</sup>According to Buettner, Americans spend about \$200 billion annually on diets, exercise programs, and supplements. Within three months of starting a diet, about 10% of people will quit and after seven months, only 10% will remain on a diet. Buettner, *supra* note 6.

<sup>17</sup>Ikigai Tribe, *supra* note 7. **WL**